

Six firefighters have lost their lives during their years of service with the Santee Fire Department. The following six heroes are memorialized with engraved granite stones at the front of Fire Station No. 4.



Thomas J. Whelchel
Proudly Served From
September 1960 To October 1963

He was born September 15, 1930. He graduated from Brown Military Academy and joined the Air Force in 1947. He served in the military during the Korean conflict until 1959 and attained the rank of Staff Sergeant. He joined the Santee Fire Protection District in 1960. He died of a heart attack in his home on October 20, 1963, at the age of 33. He was buried at Fort Rosecrans on October 23, 1963. His badge was retired and still hangs in a shadowbox on the wall at Fire Station No. 4. The flagpole at the old Fire Station No. 5 (formerly Fire Station No. 2) was dedicated in his memory.

Michael R. Kiehl
Proudly Served From
October 1962 To April 1966

He was born December 9, 1944. He joined the Santee Fire Protection District in 1962. He left for military service in early 1966 as a Private 1st Class in the US Army. He was killed in Vietnam on April 19, 1966, at the age of 21. The Santee Firefighters Association has maintained a scholarship in his name ever since. A plaque hangs in a shadowbox at Fire Station No. 4 in his memory.



Gary J. Block
Proudly Served From
August 1966 To August 1969

He was born January 29, 1941. He served with the US Navy from 1958 to 1960. He joined the Santee Fire Protection District in 1966. He was a first-aid instructor and a Reserve and Rescue Squad Officer for the Sheriff's Department. On August 2, 1969, he suffered burns to 65% of his body at a training fire in a condemned two-bedroom house. He passed away from his injuries on August 21, 1969, at the age of 28. A Heroism Award was created in his name for extraordinary acts of heroism under life-threatening conditions.



Jack D. Stephenson
Proudly Served From
May 1966 To July 1977

He was born September 5, 1939. He was a veteran of the US Air Force. He was hired on May 1, 1966, and was known as "Stovepipe" by his co-workers due to his wiry figure. Over the next 11 years, Jack worked his way through the ranks to become a fire captain. Jack was the driving force behind what led to the Santee Fire Department's paramedic program in 1975, the first fire department paramedic program in San Diego County. He was one of eight firefighters to graduate from the first paramedic class at the UCSD School of Medicine. He died on July 25, 1977, at the age of 37. He was posthumously awarded the Gary J. Block Memorial Firefighter of the Year Award.



Louis R. Ortiz
Proudly Served From
September 1978 To April 1994

He was born on August 31, 1943. He joined the Santee Fire Protection District on September 21, 1978. He was described as an energetic worker who volunteered for many assignments. He was a CPR instructor and served on several department committees. He was also in the Army National Guard. A year prior to his passing, he spent nearly 40 straight hours assisting victims of the Northridge Earthquake. While walking along a street in



Deputy Chief Howard Rayon
Proudly Served From
January 1977 To December 2009

His tenure with the Santee Fire Department began in January 1977 after graduating from the Heartland Fire Academy. He quickly worked his way through the ranks and was promoted to captain after just six years on the job. He was promoted to division chief in 1997 and oversaw operations and training. He was promoted to deputy chief shortly before his retirement in 2005. He was responsible for many critical department projects, including the Heartland CAD and 800 MHz projects. He earned the distinction of the 1989 Department Firefighter of the Year Award. He continued to teach many fire service courses, remained strong with CSFA and worked overhead assignments until his health precluded it. He passed away in 2009 from a job-related illness.

